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ABSTRACT

This critical review of "Becoming a Nation of Readers" states that the Commission on Reading report contains sensible and practical recommendations, though it is not wholly representative of all the available research on reading and it contains occasional insensitivities to the potential problems within its recommendations. The first chapter of the report describes skilled reading as a process in which good readers use their prior knowledge to construct meaning from the text, thus setting the tone for the remainder of the report, which does not contain much new information on reading instruction. The chapter on emerging literacy recommends that phonics be taught early and be completed by the end of second grade, which could lead to an overreaction on the part of some, and that children be instructed to read silently before they read orally, which seems reasonable. The chapter on extending literacy recommends that teachers avoid relying solely on readability formulas for determining text difficulty. Direct teaching of comprehension instruction is highly recommended. Finally, the chapter on teachers' educational and professional development notes several issues and recommendations: higher admission standards for prospective teachers, improved salaries, lengthening of the teacher preparation program, transition programs for novice teachers, greater attention to the professional development of veteran teachers, and effective school climates for promoting literacy. This review concludes that "Becoming a Nation of Readers" deserves to be read not so much for the research behind it as for the practicality of the recommendations growing out of that research. (SRT)

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Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading--A Critical Review

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Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading — A Critical Reveiw

Donna E. Alvermann

Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading (1985) is filled with answers to many of the questions that have long puzzled educators and parents about reading and reading instruction, especially beginning reading and the comprehension of language. The fact that consensus was reached on so many of the issues that surround the teaching of reading initially provoked a fair amount of skepticism in me. After all, I reasoned, how could the Commission draw any implications for reading instruction from the conflicting and controversial findings of the recent research on reading. With that question in mind, I proceeded to read the 143-page softbound book for the first time. Not surprisingly, I found myself quibbling at several points with the studies the writers had chosen to cite (or alternatively, to omit) in their synthesis of the research on reading. More often than not, however, I found their recommendations sensible, if not wholly representative of all the available research, and practical. It was these two aspects — the sensibleness and the practicalness — of the report that appealed to me most. Why not provide the preservice elementary education majors enrolled in my reading methods course with some direct answers to questions like, "Should I ignore mistakes children make when they read orally?" or "Which is better — the synthetic or analytic approach to phonics instruction?" (I had found in previous undergraduate methods classes that most preservice teachers demonstrated little tolerance for the ambiguity of conflicting research findings anyway.) And so it was that I came to read *Becoming a Nation of Readers* a second time and for a different purpose. This review, then, is not critical from the perspective of "What research should have been cited but was not;" rather, criticism, where it does occur, is directed at what seems to be an occasional insensitivity to the potential problems within the recommendations themselves.

Becoming a Nation of Readers, which was written by Richard C. Anderson and Elfrieda H. Hiebert along with two of their research assistants, was prepared under a $125,000 grant to the Center for the Study of Reading from the National Institute of Education. It is one of the most readable research reports that I have ever read. The language is clear and free of unnecessary jargon, important ideas are highlighted in the wide margins of the book, and conclusions are unequivocally stated at the end of each chapter. In all, there are six major chapters in this book: What is Reading?, Emerging Literacy, Extending Literacy, The Teacher and the Classroom, Testing and

Reading, and Teacher Education and Professional Development.

What is Reading?

In this first chapter of the report, skilled reading is described as a process in which good readers use the knowledge they already possess, including their background of experience, to construct meaning from the information presented in text. This interactive view of the reading process assumes that in becoming a skilled reader, one must learn to decode words quickly and accurately so that the attention needed in analyzing a text for meaning is not diverted by the more basic processes involved in word identification. Becoming a skilled reader also requires one to be strategic in the sense that comprehension is constantly self-monitored and fix-up strategies are applied when meaning is lost. The degree to which this type of control over one's reading is successful, of course, is tempered by such factors as the complexity of the text, topic familiarity, and purpose for reading. Finally, becoming a skilled reader depends on one's motivation to learn as well as on the teacher's ability to sustain interest in that learning and to provide meaningful materials for practice reading. In describing the reading process and what it means to become a skilled reader, the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* set the tone for the remainder of the report. For the most part, what follows does not contain any great surprises about reading instruction. However, comforting as it may be to know beforehand that many old practices have been confirmed by new research, there are still enough questions left unanswered about *how* teachers and parents should go about implementing the recommendations of the Commission to leave room for reasonable debate. It is these questions that provide the stimuli for my critique.

Emerging Literacy

This chapter specifies the role played by the home, kindergarten, and systematic or formal instruction in beginning reading. As might be expected, a child who comes from a home rich in language experiences has the best chance for success in reading. According to the report, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23). The Commission goes on record as supporting "a balanced kindergarten program in reading and language that includes formal and informal approaches" (p. 29), but it cautions that educators should avoid putting undue pressure on children if systematic instruction in literacy is started in kindergarten. Moreover, all early literacy learning "ought to occur in situations where written language serves functions such as to entertain (as in books), to inform (as in instructions on packages), or to direct (as on traffic signs)" (p. 32). With the exception of being disappointed that no more than a paragraph was devoted to discussing what might be done for children whose home backgrounds are not rich in language experiences, I found this first part of the chapter in line with the current realities of emerging literacy.

Reading in the first grade, a topic which consumes about two-thirds of the chapter, deals almost exclusively with the following two issues: how phonics should be

taught and the value of oral and silent reading. The first of these issues — how to teach phonics — has received more media attention possibly than all the other parts of the book taken together. Proponents of the synthetic or explicit approach to phonics instruction will find qualified support for this method in the Commission's report. When compared to analytic or implicit phonics instruction (with children's gain scores on standardized reading achievement tests as the dependent measure), explicit phonics instruction is favored by what is termed a "trend in the data." In short, the decision is apparently still out in terms of which approach is better. The authors do go on to note, however, that the "ideal" phonics program should incorporate features of both approaches and should provide children with plenty of opportunities to read from meaningful texts. Less thorny an issue is the recommended period of time in which phonics should be taught; the maxims are "do it early" and aim for completion by the end of second grade. While these recommendations are made from a reasoned stance, there does exist the potential for an overreaction on the part of some. It is not to difficult to imagine, for example, a rush to purchase synthetic or explicit phonics workbooks to supplement the basals' word recognition strands (most basals advocate implicit phonics instruction currently).

A second issue — the value of oral versus silent reading — has a much clearer mandate. Authorities recommend and research suggests that children should be instructed to read a selection silently before they read it orally. The value of oral reading is linked ultimately to the way the teacher handles mistakes. The authors of the report recommend ignoring mistakes that do not interfere with meaning. They also recommend that round robin oral reading be replaced by repeated readings, a technique for developing fluency and comprehension without the pitfalls that are associated with round robin reading. As for the value of silent reading, the consensus is that all children, even beginning readers, ought to be spending more time reading silently. This would seem reasonable given the evidence that 1) "the amount of time children spend reading silently in school is associated with year-to-year gains in reading achievement" (p. 54), and 2) teachers have been observed allocating more than twice the amount of time to oral reading for low-ability readers as compared to high-ability readers.

Extending Literacy

This chapter takes a look at three factors that are known to influence whether young children will be able to use the skills they have learned previously to comprehend their subject matter texts. These factors include: the difficulty of textbooks, the quality of instruction provided by teachers, and the meaningfulness of independent practice. The first factor, difficulty of text, is for the most part beyond a teacher's or student's control. Aside from recommending that teachers avoid relying solely on readability formulas for determining text difficulty, the Commission has little to say to teachers on the topic.

Not so for the second factor, however. Direct teaching of comprehension instruction, whether with basal type stories or subject

matter texts, is highly recommended. Unfortunately, the strategies described as being effective in sumption that skills management systems can adequately measure the "close knitting of reading skills that complement and support one another" (p. 97) is called into question. The possibility that reading "mastery" tests draw attention away from the integrated act of reading is another concern of the Commission. Whether the recommendation that "standardized tests should be supplemented with assessments of reading fluency, ability to summarize and critically evaluate lengthy selections, amount of independent reading, and amount and quality of writing" (p. 120) adequately addresses those two concerns is doubtful, however.

Teacher Educational and Professional Development

In many respects this chapter should be first and not last. Without the reforms in teacher education and professional development that are envisioned here, few if any of the recommendations spelled out by the Commission will become realities. Among the many issues addressed in this chapter were the following: higher admission standards for prospective teachers, improved salaries, a lengthening of the teacher preparation program from four years to five years, transition programs for novice teachers, greater attention to the professional development of veteran teachers, and effective school climates for promoting literacy. The recommendations emanating from this chapter were broad and all encompassing; e.g., the Commission called for conditions that would enable the teaching profession to attract and hold able candidates, for longer and higher quality teacher preparation programs, and for professional development programs that would keep the inservice teacher informed about the latest advances in pedagogy.

Conclusion

According to Richard C. Anderson, chair of the Commission on Reading, "America will become a nation of readers when verified practices of the best teachers in the best schools can be introduced throughout the country" (p. 120). *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, affectionately referred to as the Surgeon General's report on reading, deserves to be read not so much for the research behind it as for the practicality of the recommendations growing out of that research.